GIANTS AHEAD AND WE ARE MERELY GRASSHOPPERS
September 19, 2010

JOHN BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 84
Numbers 13:1–3, 17–20, 25–33, 14:1

"All the people are of great size . . .
and to ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers."
Numbers 13:32–33 (NRSV)

I believe the churches could play a significant role
in saving the life of the planet. And I say that with
no illusions. Most church boats don't like to be rocked.
They would rather lie at anchor than go places
on stormy seas. But over a lifetime I've seen
many hoist sail and leave harbor, just as I've
seen genuine saints on Sunday morning.

William Sloane Coffin
A Passion for the Possible

Whether the expenditure which has been made here
. . . shall prove justified, time alone can answer.
And the answer will be in terms of service,
the lives lived here, and the spirit that
shall go out from here and enter into
the life of the community.

Thomas D. Jones
Chair of the Fourth Church Building Committee, 1914

Silence in us any voice but your own, O Lord.
And in these good moments together, speak the word
you have for us today—this day, this time, this place.
Startle us with new and good truth, and give us courage
to trust you and to follow the one who calls us
into the future, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

I had an epiphany last Sunday morning. Now, I have not had many epiphanies, which the dictionary defines as “a sudden revelation or perception, an insight into the essence of a thing.” If truth were told, I am a little skeptical about the whole notion, but I had a real one a week ago.

It was the first Sunday after Labor Day, when church activities are gearing up for the fall. Members and families who have been away for a while return. Some churches call it Homecoming Sunday. Youngsters in my household, who used to see all of life through the prism of baseball, used to call it “Dad’s Opening Day.” It was all of that. The Morning Choir and Chancel Choir were back and in full force and voice. Worship was well attended all morning long. We baptized twelve infants, introduced two new Pastoral Residents, recruited sixty new volunteers for our Tutoring Program. Donna Gray, our Minister for Children and Families, and John Vest, Associate Pastor for Youth Ministry, planned a kickoff event for children, youth, and their families. There were so many children around here last week that there was, literally, no room for them: classes of forty-five and fifty squeezed into rooms designed for twenty; there were so many children in Children’s Chapel that fifty or so had to sit in the aisle on the floor. Forty eighth-grade students signed up for Confirmation. There was a family lunch in Anderson Hall and games and activities in the Garth—including one of those huge inflated contraptions in which children can bounce and, in the corner, another contraption: a water balloon suspended in a net that, when a youngster hit a target with a ball, released the balloon, which then fell on the head of the person sitting in a folding chair directly beneath it. In this case those persons were Donna and John, who quickly were thoroughly drenched, to the absolute delight of the growing crowd of children and curious onlookers who could be forgiven for wondering what in the world was going on in front of that stoic, dignified church and whether this is in the job description for clergy at the church. In the meantime, the usual coffee hour crowd was squeezed into the other third of the Garth and Cloisters and spilling out onto the Michigan Avenue sidewalk—friends greeting after a summer absence, chatting, laughing. I walked through all of that cacophony of noise and laughter and wonderful chaos, and it was then that I had my epiphany. This church really needs some more space. I have had my moments, I confess, in recent weeks when we have experienced unexpected challenges, when I have secretly wondered whether or not the project for constructing a new building was necessary and whether the time was right. My epiphany was the truth that we are confined and constrained

by our space. We cannot do well what we need to do now. We cannot begin to consider what more God calls us to do. We are a 6,200-member growing church in a building built for 2,000. I was almost overwhelmed with certainty that we not only need a new building and we need it now, but also the certainty that when the planned new facility opens its doors, Fourth Presbyterian Church will take off and become a model for urban churches everywhere that reach out to the city and world and provide nurture and community to their congregation, people of all ages.

Later in the week I had a second epiphany. I sat in the darkened sanctuary early Tuesday evening and heard a lecture by British historian Peter Cormack, a scholar and expert on stained glass, particularly the work of Charles J. Connick, the most distinguished stained glass artist in the nation in the early twentieth century, who received the commission for and created and installed the stained glass windows in this magnificent sanctuary. Professor Cormack explained how a stained glass window is created, the incredibly delicate process that Connick recovered from the medieval craftsmen who created glass for all the great cathedrals of Europe. We learned that in 1914, Tiffany windows were the rage, with their pastel colors and soft light and large figures. The members of Fourth Presbyterian Church were shocked when they first saw the Connick windows: they were so bright and vivid. The Trustees actually forced Connick to create a method to soften and dull the great west window, which he did, and then later returned to undo after the congregation realized they had made a terrible mistake. My second epiphany came when I was reminded of what a miracle this building is, how unlikely it was to build a magnificent cathedral on a dirt road, a few miles away from the center of the city, and what vision and courage they had and what love, not only to build but to commission the best artisans and architects—Ralph Adams Cram and Howard Van Doren Shaw, Connick for the windows, Frederick Bartlett for the ceiling and angels standing watch—and what a responsibility to maintain the place falls on those who love it and use it and will pass it along to the next generation.

So it has been a big week, with not one, but two epiphanies.

I am not alone in observing that the timing of this project, in many ways, could not be worse. Douglas Hicks, an economist who teaches at the University of Richmond and who is also a Presbyterian minister, has written a good new book on economics and faith, entitled *Money Enough.* The first paragraph got my attention: “Where did our money go? In less than

eighteen months the 60 percent of Americans who have money in the stock market saw the value of their holdings cut in half. People with 401(k) retirement accounts saw their nest eggs shrivel."

We are experiencing all of that.

At the same time, the annual budget to sustain this church's programs and mission requires a 5 percent increase in contributions simply to meet increases in costs of goods and services. Our annual expenditures are slightly less than $10 million: utilities and upkeep, salaries, and program materials, mission outreach in Chicago through our Tutoring Program, Social Service Center, Counseling Center, and globally through mission trips and initiatives in Cuba, Guatemala, Kenya, Mozambique, Northern Ireland, and Honduras. We are currently operating on a disciplined basis: 5 percent reduction of program costs, leaving some vacant positions unfilled, and a reduced draw on our investments, closing in on a conservative 5 percent. The largest source of income is from individual gifts and pledges. Contrary to myths—that our endowment is so large it funds the entire operation, or that one or two individuals give gifts so large we don't need other gifts—contrary to that, we utterly depend on you, our members and friends. And so we are this morning also launching our Annual Appeal campaign. A fundraising executive I know says that any organization "college, university, museum, church that aspires to do great things simply must have the audacity and the ability to manage simultaneously a once-in-a-lifetime capital campaign and annual fundraising to fund operating expenses." This is truly a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to strengthen a great church for a faithful future. And so I am asking each one of you to join Sue and me in making a pledge for 2011, and I am asking you to begin to think seriously and pray about the gift you will make to Project Second Century, the best opportunity in my life to make a difference in the future by strengthening a great Christian church. I'm asking you to think about a gift that represents your love for this church, your pride in what it is doing, but more than that—much, much more. At the deepest level, how we allocate our personal resources is a direct reflection of our strongest values and commitments. Simply put, your pledge and gift reflects your faith in Jesus Christ, and in some small but powerful way, it represents the hope that Jesus himself held out: that in giving, we do receive; that in giving life away, we become fully alive.

So, we face a big challenge: to sustain the program and mission of this extraordinary congregation and to provide a facility for the future of a congregation that, almost alone among urban churches, continues to grow—all in the midst of economic uncertainty.

It keeps me awake at night, and on more than one occasion it has driven me back to one of my very favorite Bible stories in the Old Testament Book of Numbers, a book mostly ignored.

Moses has led the Israelites out of Egypt. They have escaped through the Red Sea. Now they are out. Slavery is behind them. They are free, headed north through the vast, uncharted wilderness of Sinai. Moses, one of the great leaders of all time, has organized them, counted heads—that's where the Book of Numbers gets its name—has put in place an administrative structure and chain of command and issued an orderly plan for marching by day and encampment at night. And the first thing the people do with their new freedom is complain about the food: the menu. They are subsisting on manna, a flaky substance they find on the ground every morning. But there is no meat, no protein in the wilderness, no Atkins Diet to be sure, just carbs.

"If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the garlic, but now our strength is dried up and there is nothing at all but this manna to eat."

Moses takes the issue to God. Quails begin to appear, and the meat issue goes away. Now they have come to the border of the land of Canaan. A disclaimer: This is not about Israel and Palestine today and who owns what part of that land. That is a very complicated topic for another day.

Moses sends a reconnaissance party across the border to see what kind of land it is. Are there trees in it? Does it grow fruit? And the people—What are they like? Do they live in cities? Are the cities fortified?

The mission takes place. The spies return with their report and some grapes to demonstrate the land's fertility. It's a good news/bad news report. The good news is that the land is flowing with milk and honey. The bad news is that there are people in there, a lot of big, strong people.

“We can’t go up against these people. They are giants—so big and strong that we felt like grasshoppers!”

The word spread like wildfire through the encampment. The people became so frightened by the prospect of those giants ahead that they wept all night.

The next morning two leaders emerge: Caleb and Joshua. They repeat the vision of freedom and security and announce their intention to proceed based on their trust in God.

The venture is a success. The giants were not all that big and strong after all, and the people discovered that they had it in them to be a lot more than grasshoppers.

Every time I have launched a new venture, a move to a new job, a trip to a place that I was not sure about, I have had, I confess, a crisis of regret. Why did this sound like a good idea? I’m happy where I am. Who knows how this will turn out? When our children were young, three-year-old to thirteen, we decided to exchange pulpits and responsibilities and houses with a minister of the Church of Scotland and his family in the Western Highlands. We gathered every penny we owned, borrowed another thousand dollars, and headed for the airport, to an unknown future for three months. And I remember as if it were yesterday, late the night before, when the children were in bed and most of our earthly possessions crammed into twenty-one suitcases and backpacks and every cent we owned in a stack of travelers checks in my wallet, asking each other, “What in the world did we have in mind? What were we thinking?” And, of course, it was the best thing we ever did as a family, until five years later when we did it again.

The summer of 1985, as we prepared to make the biggest move and begin the greatest adventure of our lives by coming to Chicago and Fourth Presbyterian Church, we had more than one moment of buyer’s remorse. We loved our life in Columbus, Ohio. We loved our friends. We loved our house in which our children had grown and four of them had graduated from high school, and I loved my work. We loved it so much we often said, “You know, we could stay right here forever.” What was ahead was downtown, a big church with a distinguished history, and, most daunting of all, very high expectations and life in a manse, which we had not experienced for twenty years, life in the center of a major metropolis with no friends. The night before the moving van pulled away, our youngsters

were out saying good-bye to their friends and God only knows what else, we sat outside on the porch steps in the darkness, with our heads in our hands, recounting the wonderful years we were about to leave, and we asked, "What were we thinking? Why are we doing this?" We felt like grasshoppers, with giants ahead.

It is one of the major themes of the Bible, from the children of Israel quaking in fear of the future, not just here but repeatedly during their long sojourn in the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land; to a man lying on his pallet for thirty-eight years, having given up on the idea of an alternative future in which he was healthy and whole, and Jesus jolting him, commanding: "Take up your bed and walk"; to St. Paul encouraging the early Christians, terrified at the prospect of persecution, and promising them that they could do all things through God who strengthens them and that nothing would ever separate them from God's love; to that great final promise, "There is no fear in love: love overcomes fear." From beginning to end, the Bible suggests that we all—individually and as a church—have unrealized potential, that by God's grace and love we can all be and do more than we ever dared imagine.

William Sloane Coffin, who seemed to fear nothing, wrote, "While love seeks truth, fear seeks safety" (*A Passion for the Possible*).

So faith, I conclude, calls us to love enough to be courageous, to take risks —not foolishly, but to walk into a future we have planned boldly, bravely, with confidence that God is with us and, more than that, God is up ahead in that future, calling us to it.

There are giants ahead for this church, and I am sure there are days when we feel like grasshoppers. There is a large amount of money to raise, more than this church has ever tried to raise. There are other giants: the inconvenience and hassle of a two-year building project, with displaced programs and more crowding; there are permits and negotiations. It would be a whole lot easier to stand down and accept the status quo and make do and go nowhere.

I am sure there is not one of us who, in some way, does not know what this dynamic feels like at a deeply personal basis. It may be a new vocational venture. It may be leaving the security of home to go to college. It may be a four-year-old feeling the gentle pressure of mother's hand to step up into

the school bus. It may be facing arduous chemotherapy. It may be the decision to commit to a new relationship. It may be, and surely is, a future without the security and satisfaction of a vocation deeply loved.

The promise of the ancient story is that we can do this, whatever it is. Joshua and Caleb reflected on the future and told a frightened people—and maybe speak across twenty-five centuries to us, you and me this morning—"The land that we went through is an exceedingly good land. If the Lord is pleased with us he will bring us into this land . . . flowing with milk and honey. . . . Only . . . do not fear. . . . The Lord is with us."

Amen.